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Efforts to adequately and accurately teach Negro history in the schools are discussed. Impetus for this drive has been given by psychologists who are convinced of the importance of including Negro history in the school curriculum in order to improve the self-concept and raise the aspirations of Negro students. Questions of "separate vs. integrated" books and materials, inservice teacher education, and the role of the Federal Government in promoting multicultural textbooks are briefly discussed. (MR)

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NEGRO HISTORY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS: TRENDS AND PROSPECTS*

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by

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"If Negroes keep on raising hell, their history will not only be correctly portrayed in school textbooks, but school boards will be moved to buy these books and teachers will be moved to teach them." This observation by a participant in an April, 1965 Conference of textbook publishers to consider this question seems to aptly sum up the present status of the long drive to bring some sense of justice and fair play to a bad situation.

Historians can catalogue a record of pleadings with publishers and school boards for adequate and accurate teaching of Negro history in the schools which will stretch over nearly a hundred years.

The present drive is being given a powerful impetus by the increasingl strong convictions of psychologists concerning the role of the history of a people in building the self-concepts and aspirational levels of its young To portray correctly their heritage of achievement is to build a foundation of pride in self, respect for self and confidence in the ability of self to prevail. Inaccurate portrayal is to destroy, or at least to impair, the opportunity for such development and to lay a foundation for self-hate, self-doubt and in many cases self-destruction through the pursuit of what psychologists term a self-fulfilling prophecy -- a sort of psychological lynching carried out in a public institution with the Negro children as victims held captive by school attendance laws.

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Bigotry in Whites Fostered

White children, on the other hand, faced with a complete absence of a record of achievement of Negroes in this country and faced too often with the damaging stereotypes of an inferior being, develop concepts of white

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supremacy and often the fear-hate of the fierce Negro warrior of sexual derring-do which undergirds so much of the racial prejudice in this country. So, while a little Negro boy is being psychologically emasculated by the history materials in his classroom, the white boy is being turned into a little bigot by the self same material. In truth, more and more white parents are recognizing this fact: he, too, is being psychologically undone.

An important corollary to this proposition, and one which is causing concern in the rapidly proliferating programs of compensatory education for deprived youth, is the growing belief that much of the retardation of Negro youth cannot be attributed to "cultural deprivation" but must be laid to educational deprivation. This view holds that educational deprivation does not only consist of the school shifts, decrepit buildings and skeptical and inexperienced teachers all which have been the lot of so many Negro children, but that the white supremacy reading and social studies materials so alienate these children that they completely reject the reading habit. Or at least the habit of reading the books on which the standardized tests are based.

These views are becoming widely accepted, even heralded, and the moral force of such testimony added to strident demands for simple justice might finally win the day. And stridency is increasing with each passing day. S.N.C.C. and the Black Muslims, for example, have already published their own versions of American History and the cry for reform has been taken up at the grassroots level in many communities.

At this writing, California has a very recent law on the books acquiring accurate portrayal of Negroes in public school textbooks, New York is promoting the study of Negro history through an intergroup relations division in its state department of education. The Washington, D. C. School

Board has developed a syllabus on Negro history to supplement its secondary social studies course and one could go on. Even Virginia's State Board of Education placed one of the new "integrated textbooks" on the state approved list with bland comment to the effect that the "problem" of Negroes in textbooks did not exist and that until recently no such book had come before them for approval. Adoptions have also been reported in other southern states although there are disturbing reports of de-integration of some shipments headed for southern states by the simple expedient of switching a few plates at the printer. These adoptions in southern states might at least nullify the classic reply of publishers to charges of bigotry in their domain: "integrated books won't sell." Many would probably welcome a breakthrough in a business operation which must be -- to a man with any conscience at all -- a dehumanizing experience. Two recent conferences of publishers which the writer addressed on this subject, for example, seemed to harbor men of some honest concern about what they were doing to human beings and fellow countrymen.

Persuading publishers to accurately revise textbooks and school boards to place them on the approved list is not by any meas all of the struggle. It is an important aspect, however, as publishers, boards and outside agencies rank at the top of the list of recognized generators of change in the schools. But after we get the correct books on the adoption lists, we must still get the material taught and get it taught and evaluated properly.

This is a many-sided challenge. It involves the questions of separate vs. integrated books and materials involving Negro history, in-service education for teachers who are unfamiliar with the material, overcoming reservations of southern white teachers (and many northern) to teach the materials in the integrated classroom and helping Negro teachers in all-Negro schools overcome an odd ambiguity toward the continued value of teaching

Negro history which seems to be gripping more than a few as Jim Crow barriers fall and a new era emerges. The amount of stress to place on various aspects of the subject is also a problem; some zealots are wont to dwell on achievers and ignore slavery and so on. There, too, is the necessity of having test makers (and these are publishers again) include this body of information in their pools of test items. This might result in some slight adjustment of the cultural biases of which most standardized tests are so badly afflicted.

When to begin the study of the subject is still another problem and a community coming to grips with all of the problems involved in adjusting its curriculum to include Negro history might as well begin here. While most of the new Negro history materials coming from the publishers are aimed at junior and senior high school students, it would seem far better to start much earlier. Indeed, we should begin at the beginning if the beliefs and urgings of psychologists concerning the vital importance of early childhood education is to be respected. Operation Head Start, the highly successful preschool program, is based on the researches of J. McV. Hunt, Benjamin Bloom and others who, for example, believe that basic intelligence, most of the self-concept and personality and basically all of the bigotry are learned by children before age 10.

Pictures of Negroes in Books for Young

Following this reasoning, the early pages of the little tots' books showing the founding and founders of our country should include Negroes. Not as a special case but as a matter of fact -- actual fact. The page after Washington and the announcements of independence, for example, might show Attucks standing at Boston Commons -- "like a stone wall" (why not?) the first to fall for freedom. Attucks need not be identified as a Negro and a "credit to his race." The picture will suffice to implant the concept of a courageous citizen whose coloring is different from Washington's. If

later the writer is called by the spirit to identify Washington as an English-American, Attucks must become a Nigerian-American and so on. Such an approach, widely adopted, would do wonders in making education equal in this country.

Such a lesson would be on the side of those who advocate the integration of Negro history in the textbooks. Separate books and lessons on the subject might better be placed in the higher grades. This lesson would require no sermonizing on race relations by the teacher. The lesson would not have to wait for Negro History Week. It is pure and accurate history that tells it as it really was. And as the children turn their pages through the grades, the whole thing would be there at the correct era, Du Sable at the Chicago site, the Massachusetts 54th at Fort Wagner. Turner in the Southhampton swamps, Pinchback, Rilleaux, I'Ouverture and all the rest. The whole long and valiant Odyssey would be there.

Communities should insist on such an approach. There is a danger that in the new programs for compensatory education we will do too little, too late, in bringing the materials into the classrooms. Also, as a result of the fierce agitation against Dick and Jane books we might get off on the tangent of "urban" and "suburban" curriculums, with inner-city settings and multi-ethnic groups in one and wasp-type suburban Dick and Janes in the other. Education has been likened to a drunk man on a horse, swaying from one extreme to another. This might be just persecution. Dick, Jane, apartments, ranch houses and Attucks should all be in the same book.

The writer has seen too few schools which are taking this tack but he is happy to report that he has seen some and that the teachers in the schools believe the system has great value. He is also happy to report that the number of such schools seems to be growing rapidly.

In-Service Training in Negro History

There are now rather wide opportunities to promote in-service training of teachers in teaching Negro history. The sixty or so institutes for disadvantaged children held this summer under the National Defense Education Act brought more than 2,000 teachers into contact with current opinion on the situation. Approximately the same number of reading and history institutes were held and a limited amount of attention might have been devoted to the subject. A small number of potentially valuable institutes for teachers of newly integrated schools are being sponsored by the U. S. Office of Education under the terms of Title IV of the Civil Rights Act. They can help. All of these institutes will operate in future summers, some during the regular school year.

In addition to pious statements about equality, academicians must review the activities of the teacher-training units in their institutions. This is where sound and lasting progress will be made. The future teachers must receive a sound and accurate grounding in Negro history from the subject-matter departments and a grounding in how and why to use it in the psychology and education departments.

Perhaps the most significant move to date in the drive is a proposed move by the government's Community Relations Service to promote the development of textbooks which treat Negroes and their history fairly. The proposal evidently does not have unanimous support as the memorandum was leaked to a team of unfriendly columnists in early September who viciously attacked it in the September 14 issue of the Washington Post under the heading of Federal Textbooks. Civil rights groups should rally behind this proposal. The government should root out the causes of bigotry in this country wherever they are found. Also, under the new Elementary and Secondary Act's Title II, the government may soon find itself underwriting

the cost of books which promote racial bigotry while at the same time paying personnel of its various units to try to help stamp it out.

In sum, the long drive to teach Negro history accurately in the public schools might be nearing a significant breakthrough but there is much hard work to do and a few hard battles yet to be fought. More and more people are becoming aware of the great wrong being done the children of both races and perhaps most important, they are gaining insights into the intricacies of the situation. Psychologists, compensatory education teachers, human relations groups, government agencies and the man on the street are all new and potentially powerful allies in the struggle. One thing is surely certain now is the time to rally round, and hard.